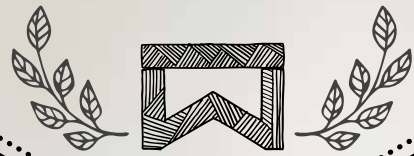


# LAND OF THE LONG-LIFERS

Who wants to live forever? The locals on Greek Island Ikaria seem to be giving it a bash and, if you visit their remote idyll, you may persuade them to let you in on their age-old secret to long life and excellent health

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## THE TRICK TO BEING A CENTENARIAN

Ikaria is one of the world's five UNESCO-designated Blue Zones because people often live to be 100 or more. Among the keys to their longevity are their strong sense of community, along with a Mediterranean-style diet rich in fruit, vegetables, wholegrains, beans and olive oil. Scientists have also found that their herbal teas are rich in antioxidants. Find out more about the world's Blue Zones at [bluezones.com](http://bluezones.com).



This page: Ikaria is the stuff of legends.  
Opposite: *Tzoupitsa* – phyllo pastry parcels  
filled with goat's cheese.



Next to where the breakwater tumbles into the sea in the spa town of Therma, the rocks are furry with sulphur. Locals sit in the water on rocks folded by history, carved by waves and topped with a twisted olive tree. A moustache is talking politics. “There will be blood on the streets of Athens,” he says, “this crisis was predicted by a latter-day prophet.”

Nearby, the rock recedes into a hammam of raw stone with ravioli-cutter edges, hemmed in by tiled turquoise pools. Locals sit on benches in the steam. Stern-faced Lemonia is keeping time: 20 minutes. Then a spray with a garden hose. Then 20 more in milky water: 60 degrees Celsius from the hot spring, cooled with tap water.

Yiorgos is wearing a black Speedo under the opaque swirl. When he comes home for the summer, he’s here five times a week. “I feel like a newborn,” he says. His friend Dimitris flexes his bicep. “I had a motorbike accident,” he shrugs, “and my arm, it was like in a zombie movie. Then I started coming here and it’s like magic.”

They’ve been coming here, in the wake of the ancient doctor Asclepius, for more than 3 000 years.

Yiorgos and Dimitris drive us to dinner by the sea. We sit in the breeze and eat lightly vinegared beetroot and sip cold *tsipouro*, the grape-skin spirit made by Poulos, up the road.

“We are protective of our elders,” says Dimitris, when we talk about the notion of immortality. Yiorgos’s grandmother is 102 and still helps out around the house.

I ask about the island’s secret. “Everything is from our own gardens,” they say. No one wears a watch. There’s no stress. Everything is done at the pace of walking.

### YOU COULD LIVE ON THE BREAD ALONE

In the village of Agios Kyrkos, under the trellis at Klimataria, a rustic home-style taverna, the sun is sharpening the edge of the grapevine shadows. The broad beans are homegrown and buttery, baked with tomato and served with the best local bread, from a *forno* in a neighbouring valley that – until five years ago – hadn’t been fired for

over a decade. Now the *forno* has a new master. At his bakery, Artopanigyris, Nicholas has been stoking his wood-fired oven since before dawn. Built in the 19th century with a hearth of Maltese volcanic rock, this oven is the heart of an artisanal bakery, where Nicholas experiments with foraged herbs from the mountains behind the town of Chrysostomos: sage and oregano and thyme in his loaves, flecks of the mountain in his potato pie. He proves his sourdough twice, started with a culture handed down by his grandmother.

Nicholas was born in Ohio, but returned to his grandfather’s island nine years ago. “There’s an austerity to the way the previous generation lived,” he says. His *pappou* only ate meat twice a month. They made do.

Nikolas only bakes a small amount each day. When he first opened, the elderly locals grumbled that it would always run out. Then they tasted his bread. Now, they just get up earlier to make sure they get theirs.

### THE GOATS HAVE A VIEW

We head north with the windows wound down, inhaling the scent of crushed oregano. Stopping for white cheese folded in phyllo pastry, crisp in a puddle of ouzo and heather honey, we can hear the church bells of Akamatra. The ubiquitous *tiropita* are followed by forkfuls of pork, cooked in a clay pot until so meltingly tender you don’t need a knife.

Later in the village of Nas, Thea Parikos, whose restaurant has made the *New York Times*, offers us what’s on the stove at Thea’s Inn. There are chickpeas simmered with soft onions, the classic Ikarian *soufiko* – a ratatouille tangle of potatoes, peppers, baby marrow and brinjal – and *kathoura*: goat’s cheese, made every day using the milk of her husband Ilias’s Raska goats.

Appropriately, in the birthplace of the wine god Dionysos, I drink red wine, smoky with old berries. “Everyone makes their own wine and oil,” Thea says. “We grow our own olives and grapes. And we only drink when eating, and never alone.”

Her *kathoura* is gentle, like baby mozzarella: sweet, supple and crinkled from

the net in which they caught the curds. It begins gentle and nutty, then turns a savoury-sour, with a glorious nose of mountains and sea salt and earth.

### MAGIC POTS AND SLOW FOOD

In her taverna kitchen in Edvilos, reputedly the best on Icaria, Popi talks to herself while cooking. Mid-morning, she is a rapidly moving tornado of activity, getting everything ready before the lunch crowd arrives from the beach.

There are five covered, magic pots on the cast-iron stove, each containing a different slow-simmered masterpiece. There is a rooster braising in tomato, a pork leg with mountain sage, another bubbling in home-made white wine, and the Ikarian *soufiko* again, one classically made with tomato – the first thing she ever learned to cook – and another “white” version, with yellow baby marrow flowers and mint.

There is more in the oven. Brinjals baked in red wine and crumbled with *kathoura*; a whole piglet in a clay pot, slow-roasted overnight with the heat from yesterday’s cooking; brinjal *papoutsakia*, stuffed with mince; and a moussaka topped with a goat’s-milk béchamel made with olive oil and milk from Bebeke, the goat she milks each morning. Popi doesn’t believe in butter.

She speaks of habits that have evolved through necessity. There is the weekly cycle of foods: pulses and vegetables Monday to Saturday, with fish at least once, but meat only on Sundays or for feasts.

All is dependent on the harvest: what you find in the garden goes in a pot. Everything she cooks comes from her family fields, or the terraces behind her vine-covered restaurant, sloping to the sea. There, she grows her own mountain herbs; vegetable bounty gathered as needed.

Popi’s day begins with an infusion of chamomile, sage and rosemary – her blend of mountain tea. It is comfort and tonic – an Ikarian habit. She picks others too: pennyroyal, ironwort, mint, marjoram and mallow, to dry for winter.



“EVERYONE MAKES THEIR OWN WINE AND OIL, AND WE ONLY DRINK WHEN EATING, AND NEVER ALONE” – THEA PARIKOS



Opposite, clockwise from top left: Niko left America to return to his grandfather’s island where he bakes traditional breads; bread dipped into local honey is food fit for the gods; a taverna with a view; Ilias Parikos milks his Raska goats every day to make *kathoura* (goat’s cheese); a shrine on the road from Agios Kyrkos to Therma; the traditional Greek salad is elevated to new heights with local Ikarian produce.





## IT'S TIME FOR ICE CREAM

At Messakti, the surf is churned by the *meltemi* wind that crosses the sea from the north, unhindered by other islands. At the new surf school, the sunset slants onto rhythmic bodies clutching crushed-ice cocktails in plastic pint glasses.

Five minutes away, in his sweet shop at Armenistis, proud Leonidas has pasted postcards of his goats on the display glass. Inspired by a lactose-intolerant Italian customer, he makes goat's-milk ice cream. Lighter than cow's milk, he's convinced it helps to settle the stomach.

Although the goat's milk is seasonal, Leonidas is branching out. There is the plain, with vanilla and a hint of *crème fraîche*, thick *kaimaki* with spicy *mastiha*

resin from Chios, and a new addition, *afepsima* – mountain tea – a delicate brew of verbena, thyme, sage and pennyroyal.

Much, much later, it is 3 am in the village of Christos and there is still no parking. In the bar at Treehouse, bartenders pour ginger and *mastiha* into glasses filled with smashed spearmint for the crowd.

In the village that never sleeps, engineer Markos has a theory about his island's longevity. "We have no stress, no sense of time," he smiles. "And we have radium in the rocks. You evolve, your body adapts, it becomes part of your DNA."

The lights are still on outside the church, music from six different bars meeting in the square. The bakery down the hill plays trance music as it produces

only one type of pizza: green peppers, tomatoes and pancetta. The baker hands me a slice, a gift. At 5.30 am, Christos is still dancing.

## THE ISLAND'S SECRET

To find Athanato Nero, the spring of immortality, follow the stone path beyond Xylosirtis towards the sea, past the bougainvillea, down past the lemon tree. Find the figs, drooping from heavy branches. Pass the trellis of grape vines, scurry down the path where it turns to dirt. Emerge at the Aegean and follow the graffiti scrawl to a spring in the rocks. Fill a bottle, drink your fill. Gaze east, to where Icarus fell into the sea. **W** Follow @NastasyaTay on Instagram and Twitter



Clockwise from above left: Sage is one of the ingredients in *afepsima* – mountain tea; Ikaria is a treasure trove of herbs, which are used to flavour everything from bread to ice cream; *kaimaki* – a deliciously creamy ice cream made with mastic and ground orchid root served simply with local honey and nuts; Popi Karnava runs a taverna on Ikaria, which is popular among tourists and locals alike.



## NIKO'S POTATO PIES

Because the ingredients are so simple, if either the dough, potatoes or herbs are bland, the pies will be, too. Niko uses a basic bread dough, enriched with olive oil and cooks the pies in a hot oven – baked more like a pizza than a pie so that the crust and the potatoes get a little crunchy on the edges but remain moist inside.

Serves 6

A LITTLE EFFORT

GREAT VALUE

Preparation: 30 minutes, plus 1–2 hours' draining time

Baking: 25 minutes

potatoes (Niko uses new potatoes) 400 g  
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste  
lemon juice, to coat  
olive oil, to coat  
strong fresh oregano or thyme, to taste  
yeasted bread or pizza dough with olive oil 1 kg

1 Slice the potatoes very thinly using a sharp knife or mandolin. Salt and drizzle with lemon juice, then allow to drain for 1–2 hours. 2 When the potatoes have lost most

of their water, coat them with olive oil, pepper and the herbs – the potatoes will soak up this flavourful mix. 3 When the dough is ready and relaxed, shape it either as an open pizza, or small individual rounds that are filled and then either pinched at the ends like little boats or wrapped up like little packages. 4 Let them rest and puff up a bit more (30 minutes) and baste with more olive oil just before they go in the oven to give the crust a little depth and shine. Bake for about 25 minutes. The cooked potatoes become almost like mashed potatoes in a chewy, crispy crust.

FAT-CONSCIOUS

WINE: Joostenberg Fairhead White Blend 2015



## POPI'S WHITE SOUFIKO

Serves 6

A LITTLE EFFORT

GREAT VALUE

Preparation: 30 minutes, plus 1 hour's draining time

Cooking: 50 minutes

brinjals 4, cut into rings

baby marrows 4, cut into thick rings

green peppers 4, cut into large slices  
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

potatoes 2, thinly sliced

extra virgin olive oil 1½ cups

medium onions 4, sliced

garlic 2 cloves, minced

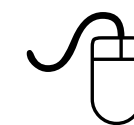
baby marrow flowers (if available) 4

fresh herbs (Italian parsley, wild fennel or dill, wild mint) a generous amount,

picked from the stems

1 Salt the brinjals, baby marrows and green peppers and allow to stand in a colander for about 1 hour to drain. In the meantime, sauté the potatoes in 1½ T olive oil until medium soft, then add the onions and sauté until translucent but not falling apart. 2 Rinse the salted vegetables and set aside. Squeeze the brinjals lightly to get rid of any bitter liquid. 3 Fry the vegetables separately 1½ T olive oil in a heavy-based pan until still slightly firm. 4 When all the vegetables are done, place a wide, shallow pan on a low heat (Popi uses a cast-iron stove) and spread the vegetables in layers – the potatoes, garlic and onion at the bottom, then the brinjals, baby marrows and peppers. Season and add some of the herbs, then repeat the layers. Pour over the remaining olive oil, cover tightly and cook on the hob for 30–40 minutes. Do not stir so the vegetables retain their shape and don't become mushy. Garnish with herbs before serving.

CARB-CONSCIOUS, HEALTH-CONSCIOUS  
WINE: Kleine Zalze Cellar Selection Chenin Blanc 2015



Planning a trip to Greece and want to spend some time in Athens too? Visit [taste.co.za](http://taste.co.za) to find out where you should eat. Also find more Mediterranean cuisine at [taste.co.za/recipe-guide/mediterranean](http://taste.co.za/recipe-guide/mediterranean).